

The Amateur in You, Part 1

What have you been pondering?



American call sign rules

When I first got licensed as an American amateur radio operator, I was issued a unique **call sign** by the FCC, who used a sequential system of call letters, based on my license class and the mailing address that I provided on my application. Since then, I had applied for, and received, a **vanity call sign**, which replaced my original one. That new call sign is what I use to this day, on my vehicle license plate (known as *personalized plates*), my hoodie, my club badge, and on the radio.

Format

Here are a few of the important [rules that govern the US call sign format](#).

- Each must have **X** as its format: one or two letters before the numeral; one and only one numeral; and one, two or three letters following the numeral. The numeral can be any digit Ø through 9.
- The first letter must be K, N, or W, and if the operator is an Advanced or Amateur Extra class licensee, it can also start with A.
- The second letter before the numeral also has rules governing which can be used, based on your current mailing address location, such as Alaska ("L"), Hawaii ("H"), or Virgin Islands ("P").
- Not actually a rule, we often say "NxM" (pronounced "N by M") call sign for one that contains N letters before the numeral and M letters after the numeral. This way mine, KNØJI is a "2x2" call sign, and my wife Lisa's, KR5LYS is a "2x3" call sign.
- Only an Amateur Extra licensee can hold a "1x2" or "2x1" call sign.

Uniqueness

Nobody in the entire world has the same call sign as me, so when I announce it as my **ID**,

people know that it's me, and nobody else. Then again, an unlicensed or under-licensed person can use my call sign, provide 1) they have my permission, 2) I'm in proximity of the transmitting station, and 3) I'm awake, like we do at Field Day.

Vanity call sign

Any licensed amateur can request a vanity call sign, which replaces the original call sign, provided the requested call sign is not already being used. You can only request a call sign that fits [the rules mentioned above](#) for your current license class, even if it's one that's once held by a close relative.

You cannot receive a call sign whose last three letters are those of a Q code (like "QRZ") or distress signal (like "SOS").

Special event call sign

"1x1" call signs are reserved for special event stations, and you can request a temporary one free-of-charge for your event.

Finally

Your call sign is the only thing required during your radio transmission. Not your name, not another person's call sign, nothing.

Nobody can legally use my call sign without my permission. If my license expires, I cannot use my call sign on the radio until its renewal appears in the ULS. If I do not renew my license within two years of its expiration, I must retake the exam, and the FCC will issue me a new call sign from the Sequential System.

While most countries follow a similar format, some do not, so you might be pleasantly surprised when you make a contact with 8P5A from Barbados, for example.

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